GOING THE DISTANCE

September 27, 1992

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Luke 16:1-13
II Timothy 4:1-8

"I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith."
-II Timothy 4:7 (NRSV)

There is in all of life nothing as important as discovering what your life is about. There is no question as important as this: "What shall I do with the rest of my life?" There is no task as critical as finding "your project," and then, with everything in you, doing it.

Studs Terkel introduces his fine book, Race: How Blacks and Whites Think and Feel About the American Obsession, with the story of Mamie Mobley who lives on the South Side of Chicago.

In 1955, Mamie's fourteen year-old son, Emmett Till, asked Mamie if he could travel with his great uncle and two young cousins back to Mississippi, where they had grown up together, for a visit. Listen to Mrs. Mobley tell it, thirty-seven years later:

> "Almost three days into Mississippi, they went into a little country store. They had games on the front porch and you could buy pop and candy. The boys were playing checkers and Emmett decided to go in the store and buy something. His young cousin went in the store with him. Emmett bought bubble gum and some candy.
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> "As they came out of the store, someone asked Emmett, 'How did you like the lady in the store?' They said Emmett whistled his approval. Word got back to the two men, the husband and the half-brother of the husband, Ray Bryant, and Big Jim Milam.
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> "It was two-thirty the following Sunday morning when these two stormed into my uncle's house and took my son out at gunpoint. And the rest, we

> don't know what really happened, but we do know how the body looked three days later. I was forced to do a bit by bit analysis on his entire body and make sure that it was my son.
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> "There was a trial. They were acquitted within one hour and five minutes. The jury was all male, all white.
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> "Emmett would have been forty-eight this year. He was my only child."

Studs Terkel, conducting the interview in Mrs. Mobley's kitchen over a cup of coffee, asked:

> "Don't you harbor any bitterness toward those two men - toward whites, for that matter? It would be unnatural not to."

Mrs. Mobley said that after her son was killed many people asked her what she would like to do to his murderers. Her answer:

"What would I do to them? I came to the realization that I would do nothing. What they had done was not for me to punish and it was not for me to go around hugging hate to myself because hate would destroy me. And it wouldn't hurt them.

> "I was brought up in the Church of God and Christ. I believe the Lord meant what he said and try to live according to the way I've been taught."

She said there was a time of terrible, piercing grief during which she withdrew from life, and then, incredibly, Mamie Mobley did something she had been thinking about all her life. She went to college, enrolled in Chicago Teacher's College and three and a half years later she was teaching in a public school near the Robert Taylor Homes where she taught for twenty-four years before retiring. She told Mr. Terkel:

> "The thing that has come out of Emmett's death is to push education to the limit: you must learn all you can. Learn until your head swells. This is what I was able to energize my children with."

Terkel's last question was:

> "It goes back to you and Milam and Bryant, doesn't it?"

And she responded:

> "Doesn't it though! I knew that when I got through hating Milam and Bryant, they would be down in Mississippi laughing about what they got away with and they wouldn't be able to appreciate my sitting up here eating my heart out. So that wasn't for me to do. It was a job. Emmett had done his. Now there was a job for me to do!" [p. 21-25]

"Now there was a job for me to do." Mrs. Mobley discovered her "project." It is one of the most important - perhaps the most important issues - for each of us: a job to do. Professor James Fowler, in a book on human development says that "for each of us, questions of destiny and calling lay at the heart of our story. 'What are we here for?'" [Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian, p. 2]

It used to be that we resolved those questions in our late teens and early twenties, set the course and stayed with it. It's much different today. It is, for instance, a time of physical mobility and occupational mobility, when the dizzying array of options confronting a college graduate cause many to postpone a vocational commitment as long as possible. It is a time of second, third, and fourth careers; and it is a time when men and women in the prime of middle age, at their most competent, are caught in corporate restructuring and down-sizing and have to make enormous life changes, a time when the older notions of loyalty to the company and one's job in it were based on the company's loyalty to you are gone. This whole matter of "What am I here for? What is my project? What shall I do?" remains with us all our lives. It is a matter of profoundly spiritual importance.

Near the end of the New Testament there are three short letters. Two of the letters are called the Pastoral Epistles from Paul, who is approaching the end of his life, to a young colleague who is in the early and formative stages of his. His name is Timothy, a young man who traveled with Paul and who is now about to become a leader in the early Christian Church. The first letter is formal and very general. The second letter is informal and very personal. It is written when Paul was a prisoner, under house arrest, when it was becoming clear that he would never be free again and would die a martyr's death. It's a dear letter actually. At the end of it Paul asks Timothy to come see him, to bring along his coat, some books and his notebook. He complains about a coppersmith with whom he must have had an argument, and asks his young friend to make a special effort to get there before winter sets in, I assume because he needs his coat, and to give his regards to his old companions, Prisca and Acquilla.

It's a pep talk to a young man about how to lead and care for and nurture the tiny churches Paul had established. "Be persistent and patient," he advises his young colleague. And it concluded:

> "I have fought the good fight
> I have finished the race,
> I have kept the faith."

As a retrospective, who wouldn't give anything to be able to say that at the end of the day? "I have lived out my convictions. I have given my all. My life is complete."

The problem is that it is no longer fashionable to think like that.

Professor Fowler says the culture we live in has a powerful impact on the way we answer questions of purpose and vocation. "A society's values...find expression in its vocational ideals." [Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian, p. 2]

For the early Greeks the model was rationality - what Aristotle called "the high-minded man."

Early Christian culture expressed itself in the model of disciple/martyr.

And in the middle ages it evolved to chivalrous knight/soldier/saint. Fowler says "usefulness to society" used to be admired and celebrated. Today we are obsessed with success, wealth, recognition and notoriety.

In a widely read book, pollster Daniel Yankelovich documented the major shift in values in our culture which is expressed in vocational models.

Before World War II Yankelovich discovered an ethic of self-denial which characterized our culture. The brightest and best signed up for some kind of public service, went to seminary, became teachers, doctors, social workers. And whether one became affluent as a result was not the main question.

Well, the ethic of self-denial is history, as they say. And in its place Yankelovich discovered the "ethic of self-fulfillment" which celebrates the goal of "getting my own needs met" and "taking care of myself." The purpose of one's vocation, therefore is not to serve others, but to meet my needs for money, security, stimulation and fulfillment. And so the Business Department is out of the shadows and has become the biggest and most muscular department on campus and in many places it's easier to get into Medical School than the Business School and the average age of seminary students is climbing through the mid-

thirties as men and women elect service and ministry as second careers.

It is a very major shift and we are paying a very dear price for it. In a Wall Street Journal interview John Updike said about the main character in his Rabbit novels, "he's a uniquely American victim - not of limits, but of dreams. If he seems disappointed at times, it's because he's on an almost impossible search." [Wall Street Journal, 9/16/92]

In a recent book, The Care of the Soul, Dr. Thomas More lists the emotional complaints his patients bring to therapy these days - emptiness, meaninglessness, depression, disillusionment - symptoms of a culture that no longer asks about the moral, spiritual value of one's life and reduces everything to income stream and security and comfortable retirement.

One of the great students and teachers of human development was Erik Erikson. He taught that in early stages of life there is a critical task to perform and a dangerous temptation to avoid. The critical developmental task for mid-life adults is something he called "generativity," that is caring about human life enough to begin to live one's own life in service of the future and future generations. People who do that, he said, move into old age with integrity, instead of disappointment. The opposite of generativity, of living for future generations, is living for yourself. He called it stagnation and the tragedy is that in devoting all one's energy to meeting one's own needs, one misses the opportunity to contribute to the ongoing life of the human race and, in Erikson's unforgettable image, become one's own favorite child. It is also, ultimately, boring.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is, we believe, God's call to partnership. The Christian religion is a new way of thinking about the purpose of human life and therefore a new way to think about your own life. Christianity is a counterculture which proposes that service to God, the world, other people, is how to be alive, and that serving one's own interests only is a kind of slow death.

In Jesus Christ, in his teaching about love and sacrifice and dying so we may live, and supremely in the way he himself did that, and died for others, we have another model: and a call to service and an invitation to join him in doing God's work of creating and healing the world. We have a job to do and God has given us each specific gifts with which to do it. That's the best definition of Christian vocation I can come up with - joining God as a participating partner in creation: knowing what gifts one has, orchestrating those gifts and putting them to work doing our part of God's work.

It does not mean that everybody has to be a minister or social worker. It does mean that some of us should. It doesn't mean that nobody should make a lot of money selling securities. It does mean that one's work should be, must be, done in concert with God's work of creating and reconciling the world.

Sometimes it means earning enough money so you can afford to do your vocation. Sometimes it means doing something new as Mrs. Mobley did. And sometimes it means a radical occupational change as it did for Isaac Fulwood, Washington D.C. Police Chief who told the New York Times that he had enough of seeing the results of a youth culture in which boys and girls have easier access to crack and semi-automatic weapons then ice cream cones. As police chief he saw the results and decided he wanted, for the rest of his life, to try to make a difference. So he recently resigned his post to head up D.C.'s Youth Initiativeness Program.

The challenge for all of us is to identify our project: teaching, healing, administering, enabling, selling, building, parenting, defending, cleaning up, painting pictures, making music, emptying bed pans, laying bricks, volunteering, tutoring, caring for aging parents, or a spouse who is ill, making a home, raising children; and then orchestrating one's resources and gifts and doing it for all we are worth, holding nothing back.

"Meeting your own needs" is simply not grand enough - not adequate for that. Professor Fowler writes that our "vocation is finding a purpose for being in this world that is related to the purposes of God."

When you know what it is, go the distance - give it all - don't hold back anything, Paul told young Timothy.

I have always been stirred by his words:

> "I have fought the good fight,
> I have finished the race,..."

And the more I have thought about them over the years, the more they have meant to me as a metaphor for the whole sequence of life and living it with purpose and passion.

I have, in fact, thought about those words a lot because long ago, I was a runner and runners know that when finishing the race is the challenge, we're not talking about sprints. We're talking distance, a mile for instance, or 1,500 meters.

The coach of the Chicago Bears compares football to life a lot, but for me, the most expressive metaphor will always be the race, over distance, four laps at least.

Distance runners know that there is very little glory. The race may take place on a track in a stadium but the stands are rarely full, and mostly empty. There are no bright lights, cheerleaders, and no glamorous equipment - just the bare necessities. A miler knows something a running back never gets to learn, namely that life, for most of the human race, is not like those incredibly graceful and powerful bursts up the middle, with 60,000 adoring fans cheering you on under a bright sky, autumn in Soldier Field, but more like four laps, on a rainy afternoon, with nobody much there but your coach and timekeeper and teammates.

The first lap, if you will allow me to fill out my metaphor - like childhood and youth/adolescence - is the time to establish position and pace. It's really very easy and it's tempting to go out too fast and take the lead. It's easy in lap one to be deceived and to run too fast which will lead to a disaster later.

The second lap - young adulthood - and the real test begins. Reality sets in, the reality of the distance and the beginning of the physical toll which it will exact. Disconcertingly, a spread begins in lap two and leaders begin to pull away a bit and some start to fall off the pace.

Lap three, in many ways the most difficult - mid-life - the crisis of exhaustion; can I keep up? It is hard work and no miler ever ran lap three without wondering why he or she was doing this and reflecting on how nice it would be to be home, lying on a couch - or at least wishing God had made him/her a sprinter. There is still a long way to go, but now there is not a large spread between leaders and the back of the pack.

If you have prepared, it shows in lap four. To finish you have to reach down inside your soul. Sometimes there is no possibility of catching the runner before you; the position of the competitors is stretched out enough that one can coast on home, drift, or push it out and run against the clock, and finish strong. And if you do it right, you won't have much left at the end.

Erikson said life lived for the sake of the world results in integrity at the end. One of G. B. Shaw's characters says:

> "This is the joy in life, the being used for a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one: the being a force of nature instead of a feverish selfish little clod of ailments and grievances complaining that the world will not make me happy.
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> "I want to be thoroughly used up when I die, for the harder I work the more I live. Life is not 'brief candle' for me. It is a splendid torch

which I have got hold of for the moment, and I want to make it burn as brightly as possible before handing it on to future generations."

And St. Paul - to his young friend:

"Fight the good fight,
finish the race,
keep the faith."

There is work for you to do. God has given you the resources with which to do it: the hands and hearts, the intelligence, the strength and the love adequate for your project.

The word is that God cares about this. There is eternal significance to you and your work. You are part of God's great project of creation, and the reward, Paul wrote, when you do your work, when you go the distance, is the crown of righteousness which the Lord himself will give one day.

That's the promise.

Thanks be to God.